Individual Assistance Mission

Another major FEMA mission for the Corps of Engineers was to conduct habitability inspections under FEMA's individual assistance program. After a natural disaster, individuals can apply to FEMA for housing assistance, and FEMA inspects the property to verify the extent of the damage. Under its temporary housing program, FEMA can provide the following:

- A grant to make minimal repairs to restore habitability.
- Rental assistance, for 1 to 3 months, but up to 18 months.
- A mobile home for up to 18 months if other housing is not available.

If FEMA cannot satisfy the victims' temporary housing needs, it refers them to the Small Business Administration (SBA) or other programs. The SBA is authorized to lend up to $100,000 for real property damage and up to $20,000 for personal property. Two days after the earthquake, FEMA established a toll-free, 24-hour hotline and began taking applications for assistance. On 22 October, FEMA opened seven disaster application centers, one in each affected county.[51]

On Friday, 20 October, FEMA asked the Corps of Engineers to provide 300 people to perform real and personal property inspections of individual residences in the seven counties and to provide all administrative, supervisory, and logistical support. FEMA traditionally hired contractors to conduct the inspections, but the response to Hurricane Hugo had strained the supply of available contractors. Anxious to put as many inspectors in the field as quickly as possible, FEMA turned to the Corps. The formal mission assignment letter, which came a few days later, specified that reimbursement was not to exceed $1 million. When Colonel Culp received FEMA's request Friday evening, he quickly called the Chief of Staff, HQUSACE, who indicated that General Hatch

would have to decide to accept the mission. After discussing the matter with General Sobke, who favored accepting the mission, General Hatch gave his approval.[52]

Officials were already discussing the types of people they would need (such as engineers, engineer technicians, and construction representatives) and other essentials such as valid drivers licenses. They also discussed whether the Corps should contract out the inspections, use Corps personnel, or share the responsibility with contractors. Division officials favored using Corps personnel because they believed the contracting process would take too long and many Corps people wanted to be involved in the response effort. In addition, FEMA official Robert Brussard had indicated that the Corps should use its own inspectors rather than contractors.

Brussard requested that the Corps bring in Gene Dretke, acting chief of Construction–Operations, Southwest Division, to run the habitability inspections and act as the FEMA liaison because FEMA officials had worked with Dretke in previous disasters and had confidence in him. Corps officials complied because the mission was new and Dretke had expertise that would be valuable in setting up the initial procedures.[53]

At 2:51 A.M. on 21 October, the emergency operations center in HQUSACE sent a "warning order" to all districts and divisions stating that the South Pacific Division had received a tasking from FEMA to support structure damage assessments. The work required roughly 300 Corps employees, primarily construction inspectors and engineers (GS–9 through GS–12), who should arrive in Sacramento on Sunday, 22 October. All divisions in the continental United States and the Pacific Ocean Division were tasked to support this mission. Offers of help from throughout the Corps immediately began pouring into the South Pacific Division emergency operations center.[54]

The warning order was followed by a letter from General Hatch informing all division commanders that he needed 300 Corps employees in California the next day to support the individual assistance mission. He asked commanders to send their "best" people because they would be dealing directly with the public. General Hatch also observed that the initial response to the warning order had been "terrific." Following

the Hatch letter, the South Pacific Division sent out more specific instructions. The inspectors were to be GS–9, GS–11, or GS–12 engineer/engineer technicians and construction representatives/inspectors, were to have valid drivers licenses, and were to be authorized to have a rental car. They were to bring red jackets, hard hats, rain gear, and basic instruction materials.[55]

Meanwhile, early Saturday morning, LeCuyer met with his staff and directed them to make things as simple as possible for people arriving in California for temporary duty. District staff should meet the volunteers at the airport, arrange for hotel rooms, and secure needed equipment (such as cameras, wet-weather gear, rental cars, credit cards). Lieutenant Colonel Mason, who was in charge of the Corps' individual assistance mission, and other district officials struggled to set up a mechanism to receive, train, and mobilize these people in the field. Over the weekend, the Sacramento District arranged for 300 rental cars; hotel rooms throughout the seven counties; conference facilities; equipment; and the materials the individual inspectors might need such as phone credit cards, tape measures, red jackets, and

The Corps of Engineers inspected hundreds of private homes like this one in Oakland, California.

hard hats. The arrangements were nearly complete by the time the first planeload of 50 inspectors arrived at 10:30 P.M. on Saturday. District personnel met them at the airport, bused them to a hotel, and transferred them to a processing center the next morning. By Sunday night, 320 people had registered.[56]

On 24 October, FEMA had 500 Corps and contract inspectors in the field with the first batch of 2,000 assistance applications. By 26 October, the registrations for individual assistance had increased to 21,389.[57]

The Sacramento District established a regional headquarters in Santa Cruz near the disaster field office, which Colonel LeCuyer directed until Colonel Mason took command on 27 October. This office tracked personnel and workloads, answered questions, and solved problems throughout the Corps organization.

FEMA planned for the Corps people to operate independently and complete inspections throughout the seven-county area rather than work with the 17 disaster application centers that FEMA had established. Based on that guidance, Corps officials decided to set up seven area offices, situated to provide the most flexibility in covering the seven-county area. Monday morning, while the inspectors were being trained, a few military officers from Corps districts went out as an advance party to set up the seven offices, ensure that the hotels were ready to receive the inspectors, and establish the necessary communications links. A military officer remained at each field office to oversee operations and logistical support.

Mason and other officials determined the organizational structure for each area office and the kind of equipment needed such as phones and fax machines. Each area office required an administrative staff of four or five people. Officials located the offices in areas where they believed the greatest damage had occurred: Oakland, San Francisco, Santa Cruz, Hollister, and Watsonville in the south. They also located one in Los Gatos on the San Jose side of the mountains and one in Redwood City to cover the area between San Francisco and San Jose.

District officials divided the 300 inspectors into 10-person teams, each headed by someone from the Sacramento District,

A Corps of Engineers team investigates the damage to a home in Watsonville, California.

which they could assign to the seven area offices as the workload evolved. For example, they first placed only two teams in Oakland because—aside from the bridge collapse—the damage did not seem extensive. By early November, nine teams were in Oakland, each swamped with requests. Officials sent four teams each to Redwood City, Hollister, Los Gatos, and Santa Cruz because these towns were near the epicenter where most of the damage seemed to be. Lacking good information on the extent of damage, the Corps positioned the teams as best it could.[58]

After six hours of training by two FEMA inspectors, the first teams moved out on Monday night. Individual assistance applications dribbled into FEMA, so the inspectors did not have any work for the first few days. One Corps official later observed that FEMA might have called for the inspectors too quickly. Others, however, argued that it was better to have some inspectors sitting around temporarily waiting for work than risk not responding to those in need. On 30 October, Fulton reported that although the division was "well positioned" to execute its habitability inspection mission, it had

not received its individual taskings as soon as expected because of the time FEMA needed to establish its disaster application centers and to process the initial requests for assistance.[59]

Corps officials at the disaster field office provided the area offices with general guidance but left the details of the operations up to them. Dretke and Mason occasionally visited the area offices to improve coordination. The procedures at the Marina Area Office, headed by Captain Charles Rimbach, typified those used at the other field offices. FEMA gave the applications—sometimes as many as 500 to 1,000—to Dretke who divided them among the field offices. A driver delivered large stacks of applications from the disaster field office (normally 25 to 50, but sometimes many more) to the Marina where the staff sorted them by ZIP code and distributed them among four inspection teams. The inspectors attempted to contact the applicants by phone or visited the site to set up an appointment (the applicants had to be present when the inspection was made). Moreover, the inspectors needed the applicants' signatures because most applications were made over the phone.[60]

The individual assistance procedures provided for both quality assurance and quality control. Area office staff reviewed the applications that the inspectors brought back to ensure that they were complete and in proper form. Then the applications went to the disaster field office, where a small group of Corps personnel provided additional quality assurance. Quality assurance personnel at the disaster field office had a better idea of what FEMA wanted and sent any questions back to the field. They organized the applications in neat packages so Dretke could return them to FEMA. The applications were returned to FEMA within 48 to 72 hours.[61] After Dretke returned the signed applications to FEMA, 40 to 50 FEMA staff members at the disaster field office reviewed them again. FEMA was pleased with the quality of the Corps' work.

One of the most significant problems that the Corps faced with the individual assistance mission was anticipating the workload. FEMA was unable to give the Corps accurate projections of future workloads, and the flow of applications remained sporadic. The Marina office, for example, might

receive 800 applications on one day and none the next. The Oakland office might get 800 to 1,000 applications in one day, creating a backlog, while the Watsonville office experienced a lull. Predicting the number of applications was impossible.

Because of the fluctuating workload, Corps officials had difficulty allocating resources. Area offices at times were either overstaffed or understaffed. As the work evolved, the Corps found that it did not always have its people in the right places. When Corps officials initially deployed the inspectors, they did not know how many applications to expect or where the bulk of the work would be. The initial deployments were designed to cover the disaster area as well as possible and to place inspectors as close as possible to major damage so they would not waste time in travel.[62]

Ultimately, the bulk of the work developed in San Francisco and Oakland, both of which were short inspectors. Officials moved people from one location to another to compensate for changing workloads. By early November, they had closed offices at Hollister, Los Gatos, and Redwood City, and were planning to merge the Watsonville office with Santa Cruz. This would leave three offices: one on the east side of the bay (Oakland), one on the west side of the bay (San Francisco), and one to cover the southern area. The Corps could not move its people around as easily as the contractors who worked out of their homes. Finding hotel accommodations was sometimes challenging. No hotel rooms were available in Oakland, and Corps inspectors staying in Hollister and Watsonville were too far away to commute.

In previous disasters such as tornadoes and hurricanes, damage was more concentrated. The earthquake was a unique situation for the Corps and FEMA, because the work force in the field had to react to the ebb and flow of applications over a wide geographic area. Contractors used local hires, and if the workload dropped, they could lay these people off for a few days and bring them back as needed. This option was not available to the Corps nor could Corps inspectors work out of their homes.[63]

The productivity of Corps and contractor inspectors also differed. FEMA measured productivity by applications that each inspector completed in a day. Contractors handled an

average of 10 to 12 applications per day, and sometimes as many as 25 to 30. Corps inspectors, who tended to spend more time with each applicant, averaged only 2 to 3 applications per day. Mason countered, however, that productivity can be measured in many ways. Contractors had strong incentive to process applications as quickly as possible because they were paid per application. Corps inspectors had come to California voluntarily to provide assistance and spent more time with applicants listening to their concerns and reassuring them.[64]

Mason also contended that Corps inspectors made more of an effort to contact applicants. FEMA required inspectors to make three serious attempts at contact (by phone call or visit) within 48 hours. Corps inspectors put extra effort into contacting applicants, sometimes scouring homeless shelters and delaying inspections to accommodate the applicants. Although Mason understood FEMA's concerns about productivity, he concluded, "We think they [the inspectors] are doing a good job in the field and we think that the public is very receptive to what the Corps was doing and appreciative." Mason gave the Corps inspectors high marks in "customer care," but not in productivity.[65] The Corps had to consider and respond to two customers—the applicant and FEMA—and the needs of each were not always the same.

At a heated meeting on the morning of 8 November, FEMA officials informed Corps representatives that their production rate was unacceptable, and Corps officials acted quickly to resolve the problem. Dretke directed his inspectors to increase their productivity. Culp agreed with FEMA's criticism of the Corps for not emphasizing production enough and conceded that the Corps got into the "production mode" about 24 hours late. Initially, Corps officials told the inspectors that their primary goal was to take care of the needs of the applicant, but that took more time. After the directive to increase productivity, the inspectors made fewer attempts to contact individual applicants and spent less time with them. Although Corps productivity was low compared to that of the contractors, FEMA was very pleased with the quality of the inspections. It normally took experience in three disasters for an inspector to do the quality work that Corps inspectors were doing for the first time.[66]

Besides productivity, finding people with the right expertise posed a problem. The Corps had only 48 hours to put 300 people with specific skills at certain grade levels in the field. For example, when work began, officials found that they lacked data processing skills in the field. The field offices also needed more clerical and administrative personnel as well as finance and accounting and resource management specialists to deal with time-keeping and accountability questions.

Critics complained that Corps inspectors were over qualified. At it turned out, the mission required more construction inspection skills than engineering skills, but with only a short time to mobilize for a new mission, Corps officials could not determine exactly what skills were required. Professional engineers at GS–13 through GS–15 were at times performing GS–9 through GS–11 work. However, given the uncertainty, Culp responded, having these professional engineers available in the area to perform other functions was an advantage. For example, officials diverted one habitability inspector who was a geotechnical expert to the hazard mitigation team.[67]

Inadequate training and changing guidance presented additional problems. Inspectors had received a few hours of FEMA training, but those without previous disaster experience had no frame of reference. FEMA representatives provided no pamphlet highlighting the critical elements. Instead, the inspectors received a sample report that was explained in detail. Each application, however, was unique and the pertinent information did not always fit neatly in the spaces provided. Moreover, FEMA guidance on how to fill out the application and the information that inspectors were to provide changed continually. The Marina office, for example, received eight "volumes" of changing guidance from the disaster field office and personnel became discouraged. Getting information to the inspectors was complicated by their varied work schedules, and sometimes they had to go back to the applicant for additional information.[68]

At times, language posed a problem. The bulk of the damage assessments in Hollister was for Hispanic residents, and only two inspectors at the office spoke Spanish. Corps inspectors translated the standard letter for applicants into

Spanish and Chinese and used Spanish–speaking inspectors in certain areas.[69]

As part of the individual assistance mission, Corps inspectors also delivered rental assistance checks. (Never before had anyone hand-delivered checks after a natural disaster.) Some applications came to Corps inspectors from FEMA with pre-approved rental assistance checks (for three months' rent) attached. If the inspector verified that the applicant was the owner and concluded that the house was uninhabitable, he was authorized to hand the applicant the rental assistance check as soon as he finished his inspection.

Although this was the fastest method of getting financial assistance to homeless earthquake victims, problems developed. Some ineligible people received checks. More important, inspectors who hand–carried the checks risked being robbed. Nevertheless, Corps inspectors continued to deliver the checks. Officials modified the procedures somewhat to ensure that inspectors traveled in groups when delivering the checks.[70]

Confusion and fraud also hampered the individual assistance program. Some addresses on applications turned out to be empty lots, school yards, and city parks. One hotel had 80 rooms, but 150 people claimed to be living there. Over 3,000 of the first 10,000 applications were duplicates because some people who originally registered by telephone registered again in person or by phone. FEMA later implemented an address check to identify duplicate registrations. Roughly a third of the applications for aid came from multiple residents at the same address, which resulted in duplicate inspections of the property and duplicate payments.[71]

The individual assistance mission ended a month after it had begun. Within 30 days, Corps members completed 19,469 habitability inspections and delivered, or attempted to deliver, 1,054 assistance checks with a value of almost $3 million. Every division in the Corps supplied inspectors for the individual assistance mission except the South Atlantic Division, which was still involved in Hurricane Hugo recovery operations. Over 330 Corps inspectors participated in the program.[72]

Corps costs for personnel, transportation (including air fares and rental cars), lodging, equipment, and supplies amounted to roughly $4.5 million. The first group of inspectors left in late October. By mid-November, fewer than 100 were still working in the field headquarters, Oakland, and San Francisco. By 22 November 1989, the day before Thanksgiving, the last Corps individual assistance inspectors left for their home districts.[73]